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PROVISIONAL SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 33rd MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Friday, 18 July 1997, at 10 a.m.

President:	Mr. CHOWDHURY (Vice-President)	(Bangladesh)
later:	Mr. HENZE (Vice-President)	(Germany)
	Mr. CHOWDHURY (Vice-President)	(Bangladesh)

CONTENTS

COORDINATION OF THE POLICIES AND ACTIVITIES OF THE SPECIALIZED AGENCIES AND OTHER BODIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM RELATED TO THE FOLLOWING THEMES (continued):

(a) MAINSTREAMING THE GENDER PERSPECTIVE INTO ALL POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM (continued)

(b) FRESH WATER, INCLUDING CLEAN AND SAFE WATER SUPPLY AND SANITATION (continued)

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CONTENTS (continued)

COORDINATION, PROGRAMME AND OTHER QUESTIONS (continued):

(b) MULTISECTORAL COLLABORATION ON TOBACCO OR HEALTH (continued)

(e) JOINT AND CO-SPONSORED UNITED NATIONS PROGRAMME ON HIV/AIDS (continued)

(c) INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN THE FIELD OF INFORMATICS

REGIONAL COOPERATION

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

COORDINATION OF THE POLICIES AND ACTIVITIES OF THE SPECIALIZED AGENCIES AND OTHER BODIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM RELATED TO THE FOLLOWING THEMES (continued):

(a) MAINSTREAMING THE GENDER PERSPECTIVE INTO ALL POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM (continued)

Draft agreed conclusions issued as document E/1997/L.30

The PRESIDENT invited the Council to adopt the draft agreed conclusions issued as document E/1997/L.30.

The draft agreed conclusions issued as document E/1997/L.30 were adopted.

The PRESIDENT stated that the Council had completed its consideration of agenda item 4 (a).

(b) FRESH WATER, INCLUDING CLEAN AND SAFE WATER SUPPLY AND SANITATION (continued)

Draft agreed conclusions issued as document E/1997/L.40

Mr. HENZE (Germany) introduced the draft agreed conclusions which had been prepared, with some difficulty, on the enhancement of coordination and cooperation within the United Nations system in the field of water resources. The difficulties were mainly due to the fact that the General Assembly, at its nineteenth special session, had called for a dialogue under the aegis of the Commission on Sustainable Development. On account of that, the members of the Council had not wished to prejudge the decisions that would result from the dialogue. In the terms of the draft conclusions, therefore, the Council confined itself to requesting the Sub-Committee on Water Resources of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) to analyse in detail the activities currently being carried out by the organizations of the United Nations system and to prepare a report by the end of 1997. The Council also considered that, owing to the lack of data in both developed and developing countries, there was a need for a reassessment of the world's water resources.

The PRESIDENT said that the Council would be asked at a later stage to decide on the draft agreed conclusions issued as document E/1997/L.40.

Mr. Henze (Germany) took the Chair.

COORDINATION, PROGRAMME AND OTHER QUESTIONS (continued):

(b) MULTISECTORAL COLLABORATION ON TOBACCO OR HEALTH (continued)

Draft resolution issued as document E/1997/L.34

Mr. CHOWDHURY (Bangladesh) introduced the draft resolution entitled "Tobacco or health". Under the draft resolution, the Council would decide to establish a special voluntary trust fund to finance the activities of the United Nations system focal point on tobacco or health. The fund would not be large, but it was necessary in order to give the necessary impetus to the implementation of the programme decided upon. The Council was therefore requesting the Secretary-General to report to it, at its substantive session of 1998, on progress made by the focal point. He hoped that the Council would adopt the draft resolution by consensus.

Mr. KAABACHI (Tunisia) said that his delegation had joined the sponsors of the draft resolution contained in document E/1997/L.34.

Mr. Chowdhury (Bangladesh) resumed the Chair.

(e) JOINT AND CO-SPONSORED UNITED NATIONS PROGRAMME ON HIV/AIDS (continued)

Draft resolution issued as document E/1997/L.36

Mr. SCHUMACHER (Luxembourg) introduced the draft resolution entitled "Human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS)" on behalf of the member States of the European Union, South Africa and Japan. The delegations of Mexico, Norway and Uganda had expressed a wish to co-sponsor the draft resolution. The report submitted to the Council by the Executive Director of the Joint and Co-Sponsored United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) had shown the importance attached to the Programme. The draft resolution was intended to show that the Council was fully aware of that importance. Its sponsors particularly welcomed the support from non-traditional donors and urged the co-sponsoring organizations to share costs related to administrative support for the effective functioning of theme groups within the framework of the resident coordinator system. He hoped that the Council would adopt the draft resolution by consensus.

Mr. WINNICK (United States of America) said that his delegation unreservedly supported the UNAIDS programme and the draft resolution contained in document E/1997/L.36, which it wished to co-sponsor.

Mr. MUNGUAMBE (Mozambique) said his delegation also wished to co-sponsor the draft resolution (E/1997/L.36).

The PRESIDENT requested delegations that wished to co-sponsor draft resolutions to inform the Council secretariat. Their wishes would be taken into account in the report.

(c) INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN THE FIELD OF INFORMATICS (E/1997/88)

Draft resolution issued as document E/1997/L.28

Mr. KAMAL (Observer for Pakistan) summarized the work of the Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on Informatics, of which he had been Chairman since its establishment in July 1995.

The Working Group, which had been established at a time when the United Nations had been undergoing a serious financial crisis and had therefore lacked resources, had decided to give priority to providing all the permanent missions with electronic access to the databases of the United Nations system and eliminating a number of impediments to access to those databases. In its concern to make rapid and concrete progress, the Working Group had in turn set up a small technical sub-group made up of members of permanent missions, assisted by officials of the Secretariat and UNDP. An informal group of users of information technology services had also been established in Geneva, and had set itself the same objectives as those of the New York Working Group, with which it maintained frequent contact.

So far 185 missions in New York and 113 missions in Geneva had been connected to the United Nations information network.

With regard to staff training, in New York the Working Group offered about 10 courses at different levels, designed to meet the needs of the missions and the Secretariat. In Geneva, training of permanent mission personnel was also a priority for the user's group.

In its efforts to overcome a number of obstacles to access to information, the Working Group had encountered some technical problems which had probably been the most difficult it had had to solve, but solutions were currently being implemented.

A United Nations Web Page had been brought into service and was consulted weekly on average by more than a million users from 107 countries. The Optical Disk System was linked to the Web Page, thus considerably facilitating the consultation of the numerous United Nations documents already stored in the system. The Working Group had also organized training programmes to help mission personnel to create their own Web pages. It had

observed that video-conferencing was making a considerable contribution to reducing United Nations expenses and had participated in the systematic installation of the system. Also out of concern to save on expenditure, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library was distributing information free of charge by e-mail to all interested missions in New York and was making personal computers with an Internet link available to delegations.

The accessibility of important documents on the Internet had considerably reduced document costs in some departments, while the missions had been able to cut fax costs considerably.

The Working Group had also taken the initiative of organizing symposiums with representatives of the permanent missions, the Secretariat and the private sector. It hoped in that way to forge successful collaboration between the United Nations and the persons responsible for technological innovation.

The Working Group would endeavour to promote the implementation of the initiatives taken by the Secretary-General in the information technology sector. He wished to enhance the services provided to Member States, expand the use of information technology and increase the geographical distribution of electronic documentation so that developing countries could benefit to the full from the new facilities available. The intention was also to reduce non-programme and information technology expenditure from 38 per cent to 25 per cent of the ordinary budget by 2001 and to make those resources available for economic and social programmes.

Action by the United Nations system to establish universal access to basic information services in order to promote sustainable human development was uncoordinated and piecemeal. There was thus an urgent need to design a system-wide global strategy for effective information management. The Working Group would be willing to undertake that task.

It would also be prepared to help Member States to benefit from the Sustainable Development Networking Programme hitherto financed by UNDP. The Programme was of great interest, especially as one of its main objectives was capacity-building. The work already done by the Working Group and its Geneva counterpart provided a solid foundation for pursuing the aim of placing the most recent computer technology at the service of the United Nations and its Member States, especially since the untapped potential was phenomenal.

The decreasing cost of the constant technological progress strengthened the trend towards a phenomenon that was universal and irreversible and highlighted the importance of the computer revolution for the world economy. The extraordinary range of knowledge available on the Internet and the incredible speed of information transmission had given a new meaning to the concept of "comparative advantage". That shift in emphasis was particularly important for the developing countries, which must absolutely be given access to information and communication technologies; it was for on the United Nations system to take the lead in that regard.

Mr. WINNICK (United States of America) said that the report was a model of what a working group could do to improve the activities of the United Nations. The Working Group on Informatics had without a doubt been particularly efficient because of its frequent meetings, the hard work of its members and their determined pursuit of their objective. The installation of computer terminals in the Delegates' Lounge during the special session of the General Assembly had certainly been an excellent move, but the experience had shown that an educational effort was needed to induce delegates, particularly the most eminent them, to make more use of the available computers. The linking-up of the optical disk and Internet was perhaps the Working Group's most spectacular result, since all the documents of the United Nations system were thus accessible to interested parties anywhere in the world. The question of fees and passwords should be borne in mind. He pointed out that the electronic dissemination of information was an enormous responsibility for Member States since the entire world would henceforth have instantaneous access to every United Nations document and every plenary discussion. That was a decisive step towards democratization, which would be an incitement to better work. The capacity of the Optical Disk System was still inadequate and should be reinforced. The expenditure needed for that purpose would easily be offset by the savings in hard copy. A disadvantage of the system seemed to be that many documents could only be downloaded page by page; that problem must be overcome. The United Nations Web Page was also a very useful tool, which provided the whole world with rapid information about the activities of all the organizations in the system. Some progress already made in New York should be extended to Geneva, where the Journal of the Council itself was not yet available on the Internet.

His Government attached particular importance to the global information management strategy which the Working Group had taken as its objective and hoped that further work would enable it to obtain useful results. The Chairman of the Working Group had rightly mentioned the difference in the adaptability of the oldest and youngest members of United Nations circles. There were also differences between developed and developing countries; the latter often made far better use of the technologies available than the developed countries, where work habits or existing resources such as fax machines seemed to retard recourse to new technologies. His delegation unreservedly supported the Working Group's activity and would continue to play a very active part in its work.

Mr. PARATIAN (International Telecommunication Union), supplementing the report which dealt mainly with what had been accomplished in New York, gave some details of the results achieved in Geneva. The rapid developments in telecommunications and information technology were changing the way in which organizations communicated and conducted their business. For the past 10 years or so his organization had been investing in developing electronic information exchange services that were at the core of several of its main activities and benefited both the organization and its members. Much of the impetus had come from the participants in ITU activities who had urged the organization to make its documents and databases available electronically. Since 1992, ITU had taken the initiative of helping the permanent missions in Geneva by offering them a range of electronic information exchange services known as TIES. The services were supplied free of charge to the permanent missions within the limits of available resources and consisted of donations of PCs to developing countries, Internet-related training for ambassadors and mission staff, dial-up Internet connectivity, electronic mail facility, unlimited access to the World Wide Web and other Internet services, hosting of missions' Web pages on ITU servers and help desk support. A few missions were taking part in a project of the ITU Networking Technologies Centre to demonstrate the use of standard telephone lines for very high-speed multimedia communication. Most of the specialized agencies were endeavouring to increase the quantity of information made available to the general public and to Member States via Internet.

The harmonization of the work of the different agencies depended on the Information Systems Coordinating Committee (ISCC), the ACC subsidiary body in which ITU participated and whose approach and work it unreservedly supported. The Council might wish to consider requesting the Committee to present a report on informatics initiatives within the United Nations system at a future session in order to supplement the Secretary-General's report. A vigorous partnership of the Member States, represented by their permanent missions, and the organizations in the United Nations system could do much to increase the effectiveness of United Nations system processes and the sharing of knowledge and information.

Mr. ABOUTAHIR (Observer for Morocco) stressed the importance which his country attached to the use of computerization in the work of the United Nations system. In a period of unprecedented technological revolution, the United Nations and Member States should be spearheading the use of those methods. The work of the Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on Informatics was extremely useful to Member States, particularly the developing countries, along with the implementation of the reforms proposed by the Secretary-General for the purposes of efficiency and transparency. He hoped that all Member States would in due course have access via their permanent missions to all the documentation of the United Nations system. He requested the Secretariat to cooperate to the full with the Working Group and to support its initiatives, so that it could achieve the objectives it had set itself. As the representative of the United States had said, the result of the efforts made should be as apparent in Geneva as in New York; that was not yet the case. Lastly, he stressed the need to take account of the needs of the developing countries, particularly the least developed among them, in using the computerized facilities available within the United Nations system.

Mr. ZEBRAKOVSKY (Czech Republic) informed the Council that three new countries, Portugal, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and Sweden, had joined the sponsors of draft resolution E/1997/L.28, bringing their number to 163.

Mr. CABACTULAN (Philippines) urged the Working Group to continue its work, concentrating its efforts on training mission and delegation personnel in the use of the United Nations databases, technical support for the missions in resolving specific connectivity problems, the development of

electronic communications between missions and the resulting security problems. It was particularly important that the Working Group should concern itself with defining a global strategy for information management within the United Nations system. The missions should be encouraged to include their e-mail addresses in the list of members of permanent missions ("blue book"). It might also be helpful to install computers in meeting rooms in order to facilitate unofficial consultations.

Mr. TAPIA (Chile) said that the generalized use of the new information tools throughout the United Nations system would contribute to decision-making and to increasing the visibility of the system. Member States and the Secretariat must therefore give the Working Group the necessary support to enable it to pursue its task and help to update the system.

Mrs. WANG Xinxia (China) observed that, since its establishment, the Working Group had endeavoured to facilitate access by all Member States to the computerized databases of the United Nations. As a result of its action, which had not involved additional expenditure, communications between missions and organizations in the system had greatly improved. There was still much to be done, however, particularly in expanding databases. Her delegation was therefore in favour of extending the Working Group's mandate for a further year.

Mr. OZÜGERGIN (Turkey) said he was happy to see that with the advent of the computer revolution, the United Nations was endeavouring to make the most of the new information technologies and systematize their use. Increasing recourse to teleconferencing, to quote just one example, was proof of the desire to modernize. He also welcomed the new presentation of the United Nations Web Page, which was linked to other pages in the United Nations system. The Web Page had received 11.5 million visitors in 1996 - an encouraging sign. The possibility of carrying out searches on complete texts on the basis of press releases and other documents greatly facilitated access to information.

Since familiarization with all the available tools was still a crucial aspect, it was reassuring to know that the training courses for the staff of the permanent missions and observer missions would continue. The publication of increasing amounts of data in the form of CD-ROMs and other electronic products on sale was of major interest to libraries and research institutes.

Efforts must, however, be intensified to ensure that documents could be consulted online as rapidly as possible, thus facilitating the work of the missions and reducing the need for hard copy.

Mr. IBRAHIM (Malaysia) said that the working methods of the missions had certainly improved as a result of the generalized use of the new information technologies within the United Nations and the efforts of the Working Group. It would be very useful to have the list of the Web Page addresses of all the organizations and specialized agencies in the United Nations system.

Mrs. CASSAM (UNESCO) described UNESCO's regional cooperation activities in the area of information technology in 1996-1997. As one of the lead agencies of the project on "Harnessing information technology for development", launched as part of the United Nations system-wide Special Initiative on Africa, it had collaborated in the development of subprojects on connectivity, training, establishment of telecentres, etc. Partnerships had subsequently been established with a group of donors and executing agencies. The work was based on the Regional Informatics Network for Africa (RINAF), launched in 1992 within the framework of the Intergovernmental Informatics Programme. With the support of Italy, the Network was being extended to five more African countries. UNESCO was providing support for the national telematics policy process in seven African countries. A meeting of RINAF national coordinators was planned for late 1997, in conjunction with a meeting of coordinators of UNDP's Sustainable Development Network Programme.

A Regional Symposium on the Arab World and the Information Society had been organized by ITU and UNESCO in Tunis in May 1997, and had brought together more than 200 participants. The Symposium had included the first General Assembly of the Regional Arab Information Technology Network (RAITNET), in the context of which several projects had been initiated with UNESCO assistance, concerning in particular tourism and connectivity among Arab universities. Training courses on distance-learning techniques would be organized with assistance from France.

In the context of the telematics cooperation project between the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Commission of the European Communities, a training course on ecology-related telematics and informatics would be held in Minsk in September 1997, in conjunction with the

EUROMAB Conference, while a conference on telematics for open and distance learning would be held in Moscow in October 1997. A similar project for the Central Asian CIS countries, financed by the Commission, was expected to start in September 1997.

Lastly, the Latin American and Caribbean Symposium on Telematics for Development would be held in Brazil in September 1997, under the aegis of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), ITU, the Organization of American States (OAS), the Latin American Parliament, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and UNESCO. The work of a New Information Technology Regional Seminar held in Costa Rica in March 1997 would provide an input for the Symposium.

Mr. OBERHOLZER (South Africa) said that the activities of the Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on Informatics had been very useful, and thanked UNOG and ITU staff for their work. While welcoming the improved cooperation between Geneva and New York, he stressed the need for easy communication between the two centres. It was also important for all the missions to have access to the information systems and be able to communicate rapidly with their capitals and with the regional centres of the United Nations. He hoped that computerization would make it easier for documents to be issued within the prescribed deadlines. Further efforts should be made to ensure that all United Nations bodies and specialized agencies put information about their activities on Internet. Lastly, he suggested the establishment of a central service to which all comments and complaints could be addressed.

Mr. MOVCHAN (Russian Federation) welcomed the very useful measures taken following the adoption of Council resolution 1995/61. His delegation was in favour of extending the Working Group's mandate and suggested that a similar group should be established in Geneva. In view of the fact that the information technology revolution raised a great variety of political, economic, legal and ethical problems, it would be desirable to establish a central body within the system to coordinate information technology activities.

Mr. BEISSEL (Chief, Financial Resources Management Service) said that as the Secretary-General had made him responsible for Internet affairs, he had been listening with interest to comments by delegations. The list of

Web pages about which the delegation of Malaysia had inquired could be consulted at the following address: www.unsystem.org. The Journal and the daily list of meetings and documents issued by UNOG could be consulted at the following address: www.unog.ch/genet. He also wished to inform all delegations that the Palais des Nations Library had created a cyberspace where they would have access to 24 computers and persons competent to help them in their searches and familiarize them with Internet.

The PRESIDENT drew the attention of the members of the Council to the draft resolution on international cooperation in the field of informatics (E/1997/L.28), which had been sponsored by a very long list of delegations and had been the subject of a consensus following unofficial consultations. If he heard no objection, he would take it that the members of the Council wished to adopt the draft resolution.

The draft resolution issued as document E/1997/L.28 was adopted.

Mr. SCHUMACHER (Luxembourg), speaking on behalf of the countries of the European Union, said that in view of the fact that the harmonization of information systems would substantially contribute to improving the work of the United Nations system, the European Union had been happy to join the consensus. It encouraged the Working Group to keep Member States better informed of the results of its activities, and particularly the savings they could produce. It hoped that in the future the issuing of the necessary documents would precede the submission of draft resolutions. A better knowledge of the work of the Working Group would certainly have enabled delegations to play a more constructive role in the preparation of a clear and concise draft resolution. The implementation of the measures proposed by the Working Group should enable the United Nations to become more efficient, to make substantial savings, and to improve the preparation and distribution of documents. The European Union considered that the Working Group's mandate should be extended by a year so as to enable it to continue the work it had started.

Mr. KAMAL (Observer for Pakistan) welcomed the fact that the draft resolution had had so many sponsors and had been the subject of consensus. He had noted the comments by delegations. The Working Group would take steps to remedy the problems mentioned with regard to the Optical Disk System. It would also ensure that users knew where to find and access available

information. It considered that the suggestion by the delegation of South Africa on the establishment of a centralized service for complaints and requests for information was very useful and the Working Group would make sure that it was followed up. Lastly, referring to operative paragraph 7 of the draft resolution, requesting the Working Group to design an overall information management strategy for the United Nations system, he noted that much remained to be done to improve coordination among the various components of the system, as was essential if duplication was to be avoided.

The PRESIDENT said that the Council had thus completed its consideration of agenda item 6 (c).

REGIONAL COOPERATION (continued)

Draft resolution issued as document E/1997/L.33

Mr. ABOUTAHIR (Observer for Morocco) introduced the draft resolution entitled "Europe-Africa permanent link through the Strait of Gibraltar". In accordance with that text, the Council based itself on the Barcelona Declaration adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean Conference held in November 1995, the Lisbon Declaration adopted at the Conference on Transport in the Mediterranean held in January 1997 and the conclusions of the Pan-European Transport Conference held in Helsinki in June 1997. It commended the Economic Commission for Europe and the Economic Commission for Africa for the work done in preparing the follow-up report on the permanent link project, and requested the Executive Secretaries of the Economic Commission for Europe and the Economic Commission for Africa to continue to take an active part in the follow-up to the project. He recommended the draft to the Council for adoption.

The meeting rose at 12.05 p.m.